Un-choreographing the dance

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Choreomania: Dance and Disorder by Kélina Gotman. Oxford University Press, 2018. £64. ISBN 978-0-19-084042-6

In his manifesto for an insurgent literary practice, the critic Alan Sinfield, re-reading *Othello*, argues that 'the scope for dissident understanding and action occurs […] because the social order *cannot but produce* faultlines through which its own criteria of plausibility fall into contest and disarray.'[1] It is along such faultlines that Sinfield, following Raymond Williams, maps a politics of dissident reading that exposes the recalcitrant underbelly of the early modern cultural apparatus and the associated ruptures – in ways of thinking about gender, religion, sexuality, and ideology – that are always encoded within literary texts. Choreomaniacs, the errant subjects of Kélina Gotman's brilliantly expansive study, also 'appear where there is a fault line in civilization, a rupture and an opening, out of which they seem to spill', marking a series of unstable challenges to the order of things (p. 47). Also referred to as the 'dancing disease' or 'dancing mania', Choreomania was a mysterious affliction that notably spread throughout Germany, France, and other parts of Europe between the Middle Ages and the seventeenth century, causing sufferers to dance, writhe, and jerk uncontrollably, apparently without clear medical cause. Yet it is not merely the phenomenon of the dancing mania that interests Gotman in this book, but rather the history of ideas that took shape around it, a history that turns out to be as sinuous and unruly as the bodies of the Choreomaniacs themselves. For Gotman, as for Williams and Sinfield, the notion of order is always conditioned by its apparent opposite, disorder, or rather, as Gotman puts it, 'disorder' defines and structures 'the fantasy of orderliness' (p. 17). In this case, the prevailing fantasy is one of a compliant and homogenous social body, which was, as Gotman shows, repeatedly undermined by various outbreaks of the dancing mania and its historiographies, later recorded and pathologised in the corpus of nineteenth and twentieth-century medical writing.

Choreography itself bears an ambivalent relationship to this extraordinary, ambitious book: there is scarce mention of concert dance or

the repertoire of classical ballet, and most of the behaviours described are deliberately anarchic, erratic, and impulsive, documented in a wide array of medieval texts and images, and subsequently analysed by physicians and neurologists including Justus Hecker, Jean-Martin Charcot, and Paul Richer. As Gotman shows, it is the very resistance of these gestures to transcription – their apparent indecipherability – that allows them to be co-opted into this wide-ranging history of movement and bodily disorder. As it transpires across some eleven chapters, the history of Choreomania is also a history of modernity, one deeply embedded in an Enlightenment concern with 'truth' and an opposition to primitivism and irrationality, ideas reactivated by the spectre of the 'dancing disease' and its victims. In the writings of Hecker, Charcot, Henry Swinburne, Andrew Davidson, and many others, Gotman finds a catalogue of descriptions relating to exaggerated and irregular gestures, betraying a nineteenth-century obsession with the Dionysian and the medieval, along with deeply engrained prejudices against feminine, queer, and racialised bodies, which she follows across colonial medical literature in the second part of the book. Readers will find the ways that they think about 'dance' continuously altered as Gotman moves seamlessly between the work of figures as diverse as Kant, Durkheim, Nietzsche and Agamben to trace a preoccupation with forms of movement deemed troublingly 'excessive' and therefore threatening to various conceptions of ordered living.

This study can be aligned with a particularly productive moment at the juncture of dance and performance studies; a moment dedicated to the re-evaluation of disciplinary, historic, and geographic boundaries.[2] Choreography is not merely the subject of Gotman's enquiry (if it can be said to be her subject at all), but also her method: this book dances and moves between disciplinary and conceptual frameworks, constructing a critical corpus – a history of ideas – that refuses to settle, that morphs and mutates where it meets its objects. Yet while the 'disorder' Gotman encounters allows her to critically prod at supposedly fixed terms and ideas, it does not destabilise her own methodology, which is theoretically complex but rigorous and well-defined. Her approach is primarily modelled on Michel Foucault's genealogical method, which she uses to map the history of the term 'dancing disease' and associated ways of thinking about movement and disorder.

Reading Foucault through one of his best-known interpreters, Gilles Deleuze, Gotman argues that the history of ideas constellated around Choreomania is 'rhizomatic: it moves, multiplies, and branches out in non-linear ways' (p. 2). Like Foucault, Gotman rejects the idea of the 'origin' as the centre of historical enquiry, and instead explores the pluralistic forms of a single idea across a period of time, predominantly from the 1830s to the 1940s, and a range of intellectual frameworks.

Across her study, Gotman places an incredible array of writers and thinkers, both well-known and comparatively neglected, in dialogue. Perhaps the key figure in the first part of the book is the German physician Justus Hecker, who was one of Choreomania's most notable nineteenth-century commentators. The opening chapter considers Hecker's essay 'The Dancing Mania' (first published in Berlin in 1832) and its translations in the context of broader scientific discourses concerned with movement and gesture, drawing connections with the work of Darwin and the photographic experiments of Étienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge. Through the detailed comparative insights offered in this chapter, Gotman makes one of her core contentions: that Choreomania both works like and *is* an Orientalism, in the sense that Orientalism, as Edward Said defines it, is a fiction without a centre. Specifically, Choreomania is a fiction that revolves around notions of abstruse and indecipherable bodies engaging in 'primitive' behaviours and it can therefore, as this book convincingly demonstrates, be aligned with Occidental anxieties about 'Eastern' cultures and potentially subversive colonial subjects. In the second chapter on Foucault, madness, and medieval bacchanals, Gotman shows how dance particularly came to operate as a kind of 'origin' in this fantasy of Orientalism: 'that which phantasmatically constitutes the modern rational self's other, prior, beastly self' (p. 41). Among other things, this book is also a history of biopower – or a 'biohistory' – in which Choreomania becomes a way of thinking through the complex status of the body in relation to the intellectual cultures of modernity.

As well as delving into obscure medieval chronicles and little-known modern texts, Gotman navigates more familiar terrain. Readers of Agamben's 'Notes on Gesture', for instance, will be acquainted with Charcot's work at the Salpêtrière hospital and its role in the formation of

nineteenth-century medical attitudes towards bodies in heightened or exaggerated nervous states, particularly the bodies of female hysterics. In Chapters Three and Four, these figures loom over Gotman's discussion of the St. Vitus' dancers described by the early modern writer Paracelsus, and the eighteenth-century Convulsionnaires of Saint-Médard, whose behaviours appeared to signal what Agamben has termed 'purposeless gesture' – gestures without any specific meaning that explicitly diverge from the nineteenth-century industrial corporeal ideal (p. 70). Gotman weaves these diverse case studies together to form a compelling argument about the political power of bodies joined in collective movement. Noting that Foucault's analysis of biopower tends to focus on the individual rather than the 'demos' or the people, she extends this framework to explore the place of the crowd in nineteenth-century social science, reflecting on the legacy of the French Revolution and the 'jerks' epidemic that afflicted parts of the American South in 1799-1805. It was perhaps a surprise to find the work of Jacques Rancière only very briefly mentioned in this book, since his radical re-conception of the relationship between politics and aesthetics – through what he calls 'the distribution of the sensible' – seems particularly relevant to Gotman's fascinating analysis of crowds as emblems of 'the spectacular *disorganization* of bodies in social space' (p. 118). Incidentally, Dana Mills' recent book *Dance and Politics* traverses precisely this critical ground, using Rancière's concept of *dissensus* to explore how dancing bodies enable political communication.[3]

While *Choreomania* is consistently enlightening and provocative, nowhere does it come alive more vividly than in Chapter Six's extended discussion of Charcot, Richer, and the rise of neurology. Georges Didi-Huberman in particular has done much to ground the experiments at the Salpêtrière in the visual cultures of nineteenth-century France, but Gotman masterfully unveils a different kind of imagination in play.[4] She argues that Charcot and Richer, across their neurological investigations, reactivated an ancient iconography drawn from a wide range of sources related to the dancing disease, allowing them to envelop the gestures of a premodern past into their clinical writings:

> Juxtaposed to one another, the images Charcot and Richer stage in their work perform a class of intertextual movement that situates dance-like gesturality, leaping performances, and hysteria on a continuum with the historical relic, and thus too with the antiquarian past. These figures all participated in the grand iconographic repertoire of religiosity and the expressive language of visual art.
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> (p. 150)

Marking the close of the first part of *Choreomania*, this chapter artfully demonstrates how the historiographies of the dancing disease infiltrated the nineteenth-century corporeal register memorably described by Agamben, in which 'everyone had lost control of their gestures'.[5] The hysterics and epileptics who came to signal a rogue sort of modernity were also, through the work of Charcot and his colleagues, absorbed into the broader narrative trajectory of Choreomania as a symptom and cause of social disorder across the ages.

Part Two follows the idea of Choreomania into colonial and postcolonial territories. In adapting Freud's contention that woman, like Africa, is a 'dark continent', Gotman refers to the work of postcolonial feminist theorist Ranjana Khanna, who places modern psychoanalysis at the centre of the colonial project and redirects Freud's phrase back onto the concerns of his own discipline.[6] One of the many strengths of this book lies in the way Gotman traces the afterlives of her key texts, showing how they take on new forms and interpretations as they pass into the hands of editors, readers, and translators. Chapter Seven sees Hecker's *Epidemics of the Middle Ages* return once more through the lens of his English translator, the epidemiologist and Orientalist Benjamin Guy Babington, treasurer of the London-based Sydenham Society. Through a careful dissection of the marginalia and footnotes Babington added to Hecker's text, Gotman shows how Babington collapsed a whole host of diverse case studies, drawn from various parts of the world, under the catch-all notion of Choreomania in order to 'advance what had become an increasingly global comparative project' (p. 177). Such comparative work proliferated particularly around the image of tarantism, a dance disorder linked to the Italian tarantella and to broader anxieties about Southern Italy's imagined function as a doorway to the Orient; or, as Goethe succinctly put it, 'Sicily implies Asia and Africa' (p. 182).

An important recurring term in Gotman's analysis is 'translatio', which she takes to mean 'the migration of intellectual gestures […] across discursive terrains' (p. 13). Chapter Eight, for instance, details a suggestive translatio between 'neurological observation and political diagnosis', enabled by the literal movement of Charcot's students from the lecture halls of Paris to Madagascar and Brazil, where they interpreted gestures of political dissent (by the Malagasy rebels and the Brazilian *sertões*) as symptoms of Choreomania (p. 195). Another impressive aspect of this book lies in the way Gotman measures subtle shifts in attitudes towards the dancing disease as it was identified in different places and contexts. What had been a hangover from classical and medieval cultures (in the writings of Hecker and Charcot) was reimagined as a more threatening demonstration of bodily excess by these travelling physicians at moments when medical conceptions and political turmoil were potently merged. Indeed, perhaps the most intriguing of Gotman's case studies is the Ghost Dance of Sioux and other Native Americans, which starkly illustrates how dance came to operate as an indicator of, and shorthand for, the ambivalent cultural divisions between settlers and indigenous populations:

> Dance, as a practice 'indulged' in by Native Americans, became a contested measure of cultural difference and sameness, pitting modern settlers against a depraved but also familiar and childlike way of being that was no longer acceptable in the new, industrial, and industrious political and moral regime.
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> (p. 225)

Although, as Gotman admits, the Ghost Dance does not necessarily constitute an obvious case of Choreomania, the literature produced around it does mimic the vocabulary particular to Hecker's writing on the dancing disease, thereby tracing another mutation in this protean genealogy. From here on, we see how the matrix of ideas formed around the concept of Choreomania moves away (in part) from its roots in antiquity, opening up a new set of racial and cultural associations.

These different threads combine in Chapter Ten on 'Cargo Cults in the Antipodes', which opens with an anecdote describing Darwin landing in

Tierra del Fuego in 1832 and participating in a game called 'monkey see, monkey do' with his local hosts. This game involved the Fuegians imitating the gestures, songs, and even the dances performed by the crew of the *Beagle* with uncanny accuracy. According to Gotman, the 'scene' of contact Darwin describes hinges on a mimetic mechanism that René Girard terms the 'monstrous double', an anxious interplay of desire and mistrust that characterises Orientalist configurations of dance crazes: 'The phantasm of primeval dance appears as the amorphous other that modern science employs to imagine itself against' (p. 253). Assembling a series of fascinating case studies of cargo cults and liberation movements in the South Seas, this chapter elegantly demonstrates how the notion of Choreomania – and related states of trance and ecstatic possession – came to signal, not so much a medical disorder, but a cultural act that was later romantically absorbed into anti-colonial narratives. Developing these observations, the final chapter considers the emergence of popular dance movements in the US, showing how Orientalist discourses of the dancing disease were repurposed to construe the body of the black dancer as a source of unknowable and indecipherable motion. Choreomania's prejudices persist, as Gotman acknowledges, into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

It is difficult to position this exceptional book within disciplinary boundaries – dance studies, performance studies, postcolonial studies, or otherwise – but, as Gotman contends from the outset, the limits of fields are perpetually moving; indeed, it is in our interests that they do so, since the instinct to contain knowledge within strict parameters, Foucault reminds us, is one that ought to be suspected (p. 298). Very occasionally, the historical 'scenes' under analysis are lost in the dazzling conceptual dances Gotman performs, but at its best and most ambitious, *Choreomania* is a re-evaluation of the very concept of modernity, one that emphasises fantasies of return, repetition, and collective movement over the oft-cited aspirations of novelty and breakage:

> Modernity is anxious to wrest itself from its inheritance and just as anxious to find grounding in it; this dual pull creates a kinetic moment, in which movement itself is at stake, and the relative velocities connecting past and present, here and elsewhere, produce intensities

> that converge on choreic and choreographic tropes, striking slightly different chords in every new era according to these different relations. (p. 304)

Gotman's task in this study, as a self-styled 'historian of ideas about dance', is far from straight-forward: the mercurial voices and unsettled texts that constitute what she calls the 'archival repertoire' of Choreomania leave her at once 'chasing after shadows and perpetually mired in words' (p. 310). Yet what she accomplishes in the process is a daring negotiation with the history of 'movement', one that persuades her readers to imagine the possibilities inherent in the sight of bodies dancing beyond the rigid confines of the ordinary – outside, perhaps, the onward march of late capitalism – and into states of dissent, disruption, and ecstatic disorder.

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[1] Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 45.

[2] Relevant studies in this vein include Gabriele Brandstetter, *Poetics of Dance: Body, Image, and Space in the Historical Avant-Gardes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* (London: Routledge, 2011); Felicia McCarren, *Dance Pathologies: Performance, Poetics, Medicine* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

[3] Dana Mills, *Dance and Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016).

[4] Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière*, trans. Alisa Hartz (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).

[5] Giorgio Agamben, 'Notes on Gesture,' in *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 1993), 137.

[6] Ranjana Khanna, *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).